

## Host-bakers continue a legacy of service in small ways

By Teresa A. Parsons

Perceptive guests at Holy Family Church will notice something different about the parish's communion-hosts.

Creamy white in color, Holy Family's hosts are crisp and flaky in texture. They melt away almost instantly in your mouth and taste like fresh-baked bread.

Holy Family's home-made communion hosts are the gift of roughly a dozen parish women who have passed along the tradition since the early part of this century.

Not even the women who currently bake hosts at Holy Family would point to their pleasant-tasting product as a matter of great importance. But they do somehow epitomize a legacy of quiet service in small ways, which has sometimes been overlooked in the rush to embrace justice and outreach and activism.

The host-bakers of Holy Family gather about once a month on Tuesday mornings. Just after the 8 a.m. Mass, they meet in a small room next to the sacristy. Each baker has assigned tasks.

Anna Mae Tette always mixes the batter: one part flour to one part ice water. Mary Schwartz pours the batter onto the ancient press to bake. Akin to a waffle iron, the press produces a sheet outlined with the imprints of different-sized wafers and liturgical symbols.

The press, which bears a patent dated 1918, has been in the parish's service longer than any of the bakers have. Occasionally, it breaks down, and they scramble to find someone who will repair it. The last time the press broke, Schwartz entrusted it to a city firefighter who is also an electrician.

"I don't know where we'd get another one," she said.

Once baked, the sheets of wafers are stored in a steam chest until the following month, when they are firm enough to be cut and counted.

While Schwartz is baking a new batch of wafers, Ida Dwyer usually feeds the previous month's wafer sheets into a cutter. Since recent bouts of eye trouble have kept Dwyer at home, Audrey Nau has stepped in to help.

Margaret St. John operates the cutters, which are built into a small table. One cutter stamps out large hosts to be used by the priests during consecration. The other produces smaller, individual-sized hosts. Tette then counts the hosts and keeps a record of how many the bakers make.

As the host-bakers go through their prescribed routine, they chat comfortably about their children, grandchildren and friends. It was their children — actually their sons — who brought them together in the first place, and the women who bake hosts at Holy Family tend to mark time by the milestones of family life.

Host-baking was once a sort of privilege bestowed upon mothers whose sons were studying for priesthood. The sons of the women at Holy Family left the seminary long ago — a few become priests, but many more for other lifestyles.

Anna Mae Tette is the matriarch of the current group and the only one who wasn't born and raised in the immediate neighborhood. She grew up just across the river in Our Lady of Perpetual Help Parish.

Tette began baking hosts when her first son, John, entered the seminary, around 1964. He left the seminary, and later died in Vietnam. This would have been the year he'd have turned 41, his mother recalled.

Along with Eva Gross, Ida Dwyer, Millie Andrews and several others, Tette took over from the elderly Halbleib sisters, who had baked Holy Family's hosts as long as any living person seems to remember.

Gross, whose son is Father Lawrence Gross, pastor of Holy Apostles Church, was president of the Rosary Society when Holy Family's pastor asked her to help organize the new host-baking group. She recalled that the Halbleibs turned over all their equipment gratefully, but got "a little befuddled" when they tried to explain the procedure to the new group.

"We started from scratch and we were just green," Gross recalled. "We had quite a time about it."

At last, one of the parish's associate pastors took note of their struggles and arranged for them to visit Holy Angels Convent on Winton Road, where the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity had long baked hosts for other parishes. Thanks to their generous advice, the ladies from Holy Family began to get the hang of host-baking.

"The minute I did it for the first time, I began to love it," Gross said. "It's a little



Mary Schwartz prepares the baking iron by greasing it with olive oil.

Jeff Goulding/Courier-Journal



Margaret St. John and Audrey Nau stack the larger hosts, which will be placed under glass to keep them flat.



Anna Mae Tette's job is to count the cut hosts and put them into tins to keep them fresh.

fussy . . . but we did have a nice time doing it!"

People have always dropped in and out of the host-baking group as circumstances or changing interests dictated. Ill health forced Gross to retire from the group several years ago. Millie Andrews died. It's not clear when Ida Dwyer will be able to help again.

"Newcomers" Nau, St. John and Schwartz have stepped in to take their places. Each of the three was born and raised, baptized and married in Holy Family Parish, as were most of their children. Schwartz and St. John were classmates at Holy Family School, while Nau was one year behind them.

In their lifetimes, they've watched almost everything change at Holy Family. The pastors they grew up with and the sisters who taught

them are gone; the altar has been turned around; the neighborhood has changed; friends have died or moved away.

But the process of host-baking remains the same, and the spirits of the Halbleib sisters and Millie Andrews are still very much alive in the small room off the sacristy. It's easy to imagine their ghostly forms peering over Mary Schwartz's shoulder and whispering, "Pay at-

ention! They're getting too brown!"

When it comes time to find a new host-baker, Tette said she usually relies on the Holy Spirit, although she once used the parish bulletin as well.

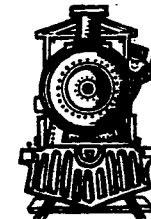
"I'll say 'Holy Spirit, tell me who to ask next,'" she explained. "And then I'll tap that person on the shoulder one day and say, 'The Lord wants you to help make hosts.'"

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